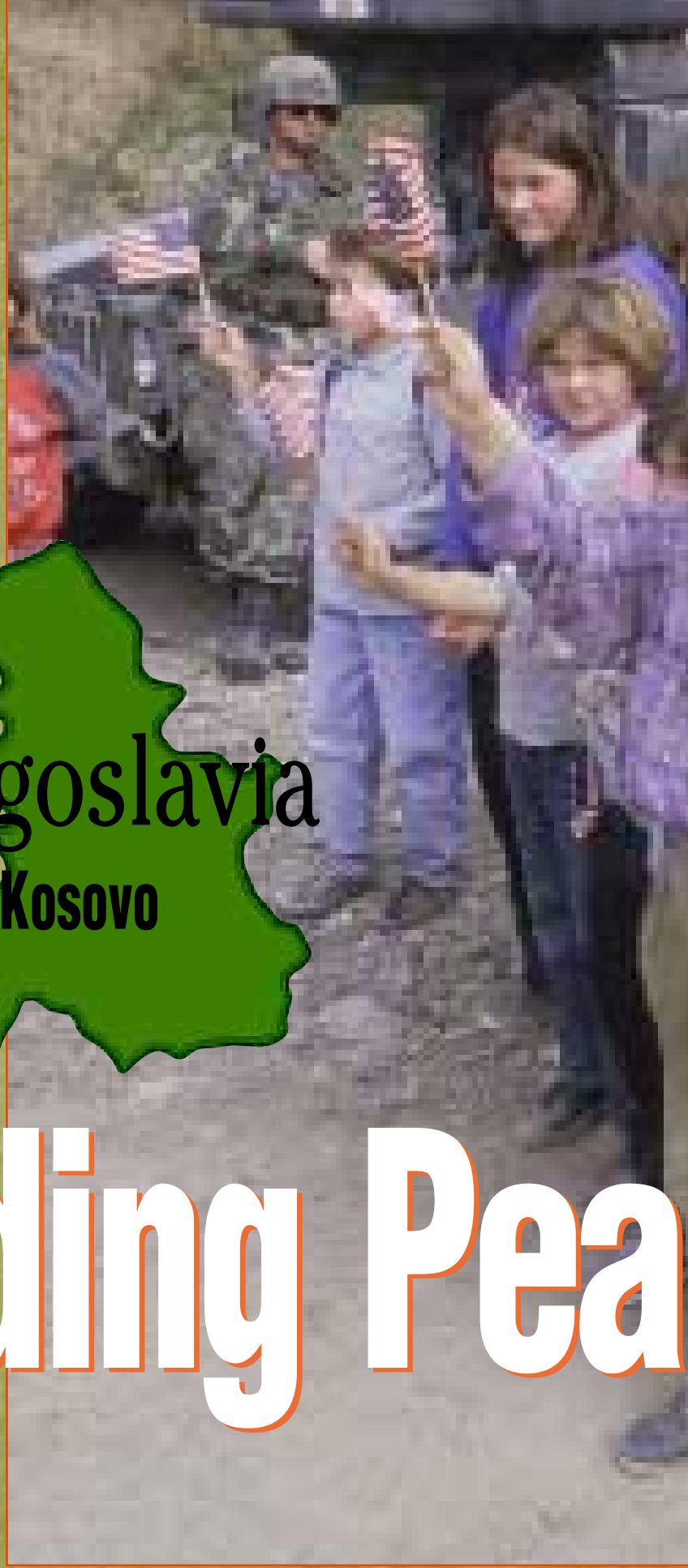
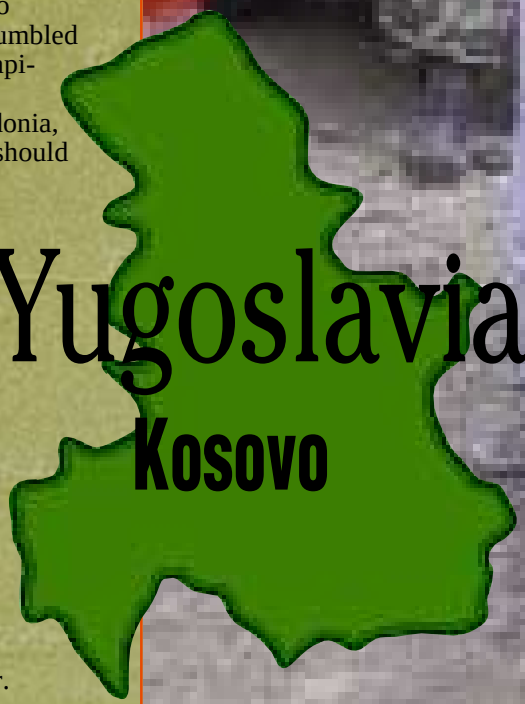
As the new century begins, U.S. soldiers in Kosovo continue their vital peace-building mission. It is a task filled with both challenges and rewards.





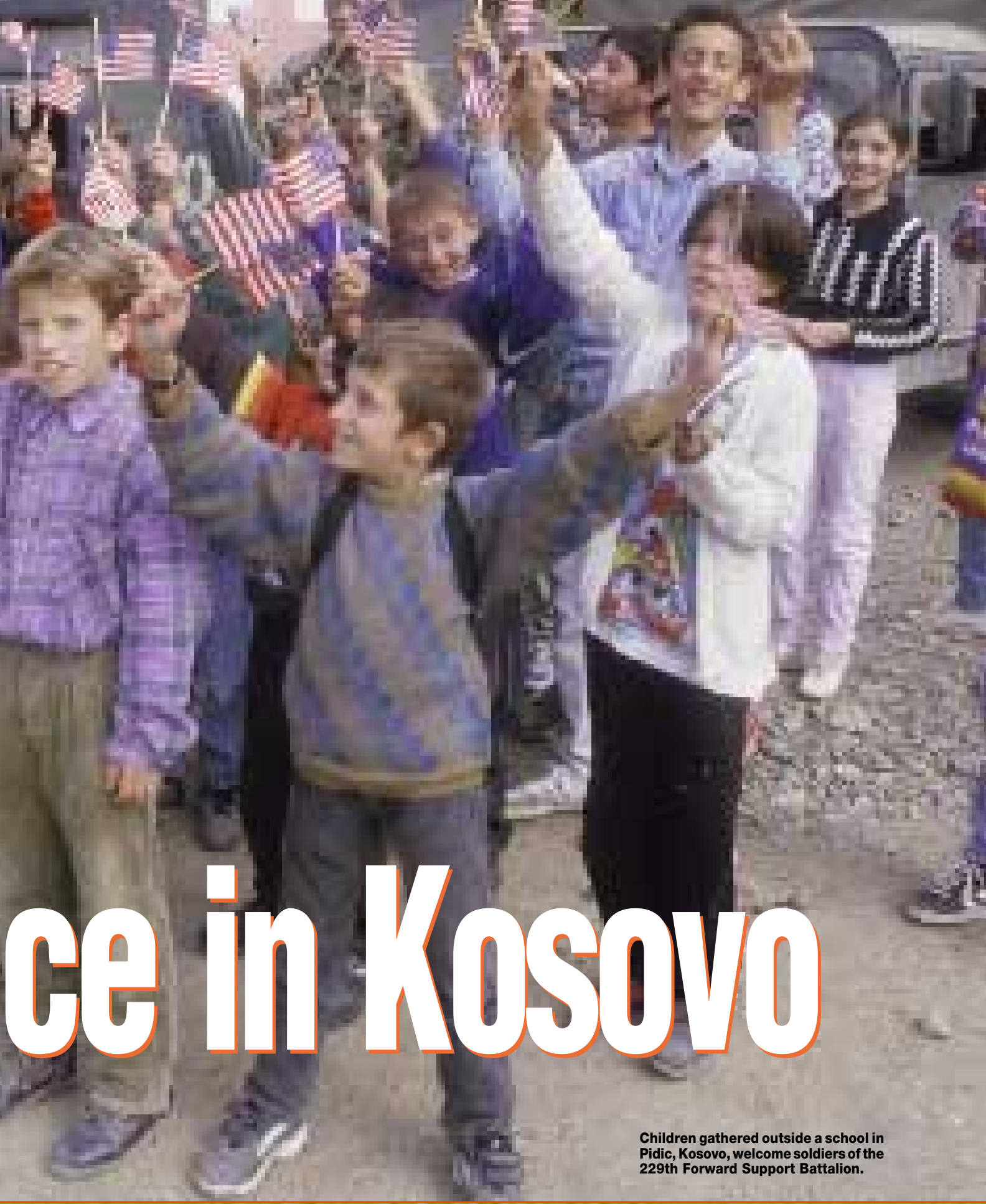
Guarding Pea

Story and Photos by Heike Hasenauer

NEAR the Macedonia-Kosovo border, armored Humvees rumbled over "Route Hawk," the dilapidated two-lane main road leading from Skopje, Macedonia, toward Pristina, Kosovo, for what should have been a two-hour drive to the Army's Camp Bondsteel.

Transport trucks, military vehicles from various countries, taxis and sub-compact European cars heading to and from Kosovo clogged the road. Vehicles backed up or left the crater-pocked route for a dirt trail that ran below the left lane of traffic, kicking up thick dust clouds in their wakes.

Simultaneously, pedestrians walked alongside the haphazard route, many of them returning to Kosovo for the weekend from jobs in Macedonia. They hauled food and supplies across the border.



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Children gathered outside a school in Pidic, Kosovo, welcome soldiers of the 229th Forward Support Battalion.

Guarding Peace in Kosovo

Children, too, eager to earn a few precious denars or German marks, poured into the street, pushing wheelbarrows loaded with luggage.

The trip to the Army's main base camp near Urosevac — home to some 4,500 U.S. soldiers — took five hours. When the Humvees arrived, the well-lit camp — surrounded by darkness and an eerie stillness — was a hive of activity. With the 10 p.m. curfew enforced by NATO forces throughout Kosovo, movement in and around Urosevac and Gjnilane is limited to the U.S. military base camps. In Gjnilane, Camp Monteith — which houses some 2,500 U.S. soldiers — was equally busy.

At both camps, throngs of Kosovar and Serb construction workers changed shifts. They're among construction crews working around the clock to complete plumbing and electrical connections in the base camps' SEAhuts (Southeast-Asia huts), before the bitter winter cold sets in.

At 6 a.m. at Camp Bondsteel, soldiers awakened to the familiar sound of reveille, followed by the song "I'm proud to be an American … God bless the U.S.A."

As Christmas drew nearer, military officials monitored the movement of Kosovars and Serbs in order to thwart potential outbreaks of hostilities. But sporadic clashes between centuries-old rivals continued, said Task Force Falcon spokesman CPT Larry Kaminski.

In the Russian sector, in the village of Kamenica, the crews of Serb tanks, firmly positioned at the Kosovo-Serbian border, watched the former cultural center inhabited by U.S. and Russian soldiers, members of the temporary "government" that included representatives from the United Nations mission in Kosovo, the U.N. police and others.

"There are a lot of hot spots here," said SSG John Gennari, a Reservist from the 415th Civil Affairs Battalion in Kalamazoo, Mich., the first Army Reserve unit to be called up for duty in Kosovo. "This is the largest sector U.S. soldiers patrol. It's composed of 66,000 people, 99 percent of them Kosovar.

"The northern part of Kamenica, on the Serbian border, is very remote and isolated," Gennari said. "Nobody wants to come here; they prefer the more highly populated areas, like Pristina." Here, U.S. Army military police and two U.S. special forces teams are responsible for 124 villages, 17 of them with populations of more than 1,000.

A soldier from the Germany-based 1st Infantry Division patrols with one of some 600 Russian troops stationed in Kosovo.

"There are about 600 Russian soldiers here," said Gennari, in civilian life a shift commander with the Michigan Department of Corrections. "Our MPs are the cops. The Russians man the checkpoints, conduct border patrols and escort the Serbs to their fields."

1LT James Rohr from the 1st Infantry Division's 1st MP Co. said:

Night falls over Camp Bondsteel, near Urosevac. The installation is home to some 4,500 U.S. soldiers.

"The Russians, who are in Kosovo for one year, feel lucky to be here and not off fighting in Chechnya. Acceptance by the Kosovars has certainly added to their positive attitude.

"Initially, the Kosovars protested and booed the Russians' presence," he said. "And the Serbs initially feared us, believing the U.S. soldiers would throw them out of the country. Since both sides have seen us working together, they realize they don't have to fear the Russians or the Americans."

Another positive change that has brought Kosovars and Serbs together for a common cause has been the re-establishment of Radio Kamenica.

Four Serbs and seven Kosovars operate it. On the first day of broadcasting, in October, they played mostly music. But they plan to piggyback onto another station, perhaps the one in Gnjilane, to broadcast news and information, said Gennari, who was instrumental in getting the station up and running.

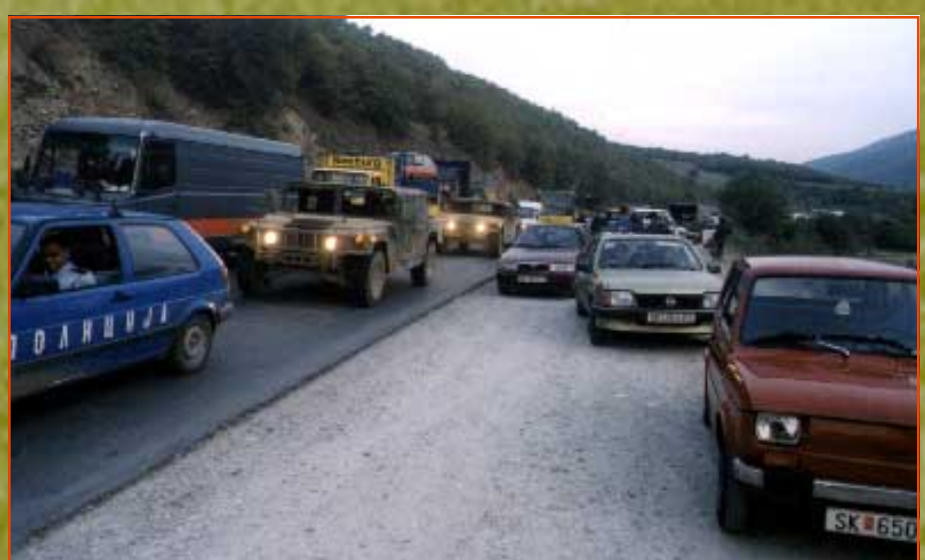
"The most difficult part of our job now is to protect the Serbs," said MAJ Michael Boehme, a member of the 415th, who commands the Military Information Center in Gnjilane.

"Serbs did some horrendous things here. I saw the torture chair where a bladed arm comes down and slices fingers off, and the electric bed where people were electrocuted," said Boehme, a Michigan police officer in civilian life. He was the first person on the scene after a 66-year-old Serb judge in Gnjilane was beaten to death and his son seriously wounded.

"In Kamenica, before the war, Serbs were the power base, and they controlled everything," Gennari said. "Whole villages were buried out here. When we first arrived at the cultural center, which had been off-limits to Kosovars, the people threw flowers at us. It was like liberating Paris.

"For the Serbs who remain, safety is the key issue," Gennari said. "Kosovars are concerned with basic life support. Services like water and electricity are sporadic at best. Food is available, but of low quality and little variety."

In one village in Kamenica, 1,500 people depend on outside aid for food. In the villages, collectively, some 30 percent need help, Gennari said. Many people are staying with friends and relatives. Some 1,000 anticipated moving into two shelters that were to be built before the new year.



The absence of traffic-law enforcement means that roads throughout Kosovo — including the main route from Macedonia to Urosevac — are often jammed for hours.

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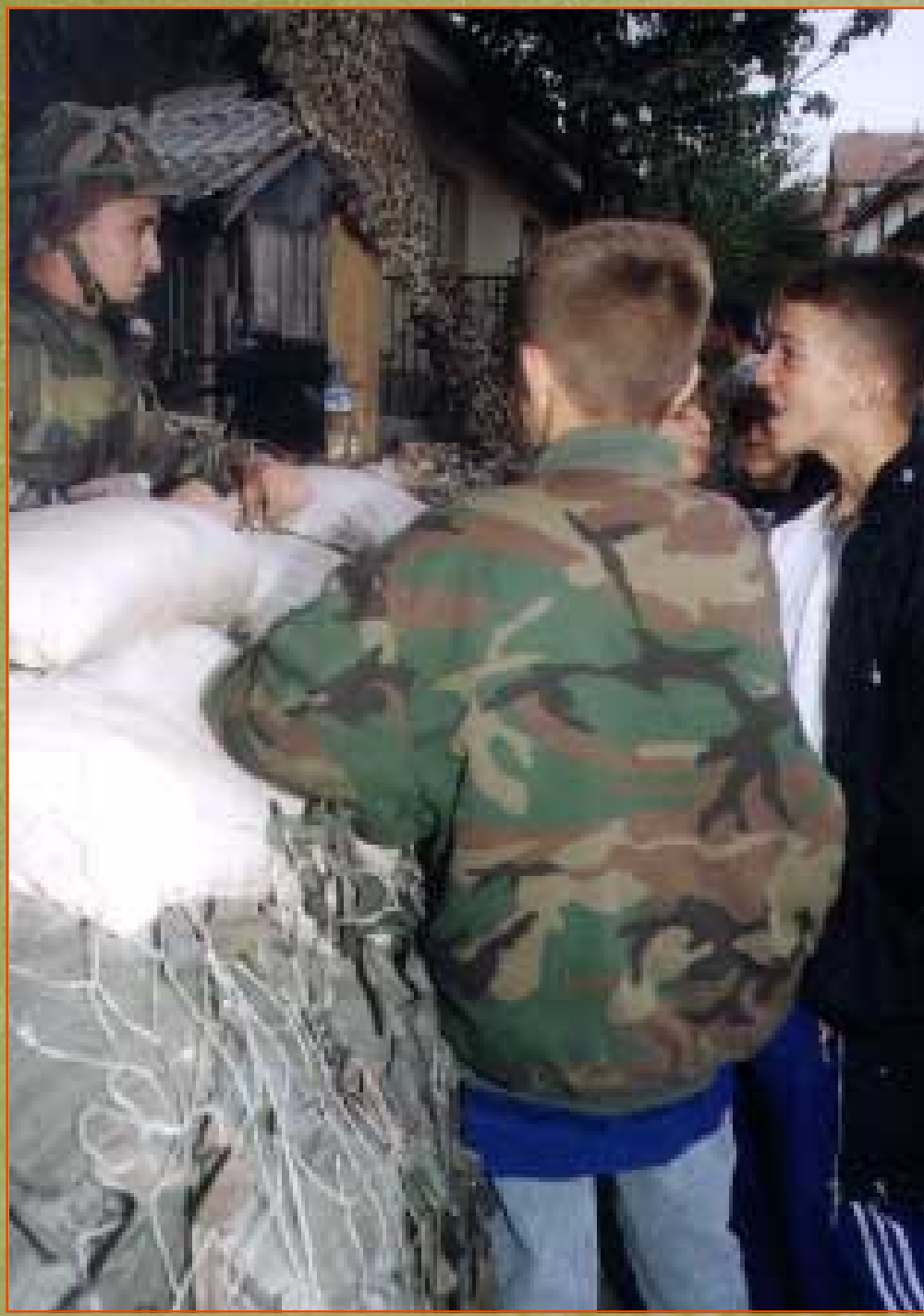


A soldier from the Fort Bragg-based 504th Inf. Regiment talks with a group of local children while manning a position outside a Serb-occupied home in Urosevac.

And to help those forced to live in ruined buildings, aid organizations provided shelter kits, rolls of plastic and one space heater per family so they could heat at least one room, Gennari said.

The Serbs who remain are mostly the elderly and sick," Boehme said. "They tell us they don't want bread and bags of sugar. They want protection."

During an eight-day period at the end of September, more than six grenades went off near the old police station that is now the Military Information Center in Gnjilane, where Boehme and his staff have their headquarters.

And in October, someone tossed two grenades into Miroslav Kragic's front yard. The 23-year-old Serb — a translator for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe — lives in Gnjilane with his sister and parents.

Kragic's sister studied at Pristina University until the Serbs could no longer teach there; the faculty was transferred to Serbia after the war. Kragic's mother, a pharmacist, was likewise shut out. Serbs were fired from their positions at Gnjilane Hospital, just as Kosovars had been forced out of schools and jobs when Serbs ruled Kosovo.

Now, many Serbs work as interpreters or are employed by the construction company Browne and Root, Kragic said. "Every morning, we're picked up and brought back home. We look forward to the Americans' visits to check up on us, even after the 10 o'clock curfew, because we have no other visitors.

"Before the war, this was a mixed area of Serbs and Kosovars," Kragic said. "Then everyone moved out. After the war, the population doubled to about 90,000. The Kosovars who live here now are not the original inhabitants of the area. They would know we don't have any reason to flee."

"Serbs say 'We don't have any blood on our hands,'" said 1LT Sheldon Watson, a physician's assistant with the Schweinfurt, Germany-based 1st Battalion, 7th Field Artillery Regt.

"When we first got here, there were a lot of house burnings," Watson said. "And not all of them were set by enemies. Many people burned their own homes before leaving the country so that no one else could have them."

Soldiers from the 3rd Bn., 504th Inf., monitor the flow of vehicles and people through downtown Urosevac's crowded streets.

"Because civil affairs is considered special operations, two of our people can go out and walk quietly down the streets talking to people," Boehme said. "Other units go out with a larger group of soldiers for security. We can see things they can't see from their Humvees."

When the soldiers visit homes, "the people are gracious hosts," Boehme said. "But with their graciousness usually comes a request, or they know someone who wants something."

In October, 58 soldiers from the civil affairs unit oversaw the city's public utilities and were involved with reopening schools, hospitals and fire departments. They communicated with numerous non-governmental organizations to preclude any duplication of effort.

Countless problems need to be corrected throughout Kosovo, Boehme said. In Gnjilane, "the water company, for example, is archaic. Three of its four limestone filters are broken, and the fourth works on one-quarter power."

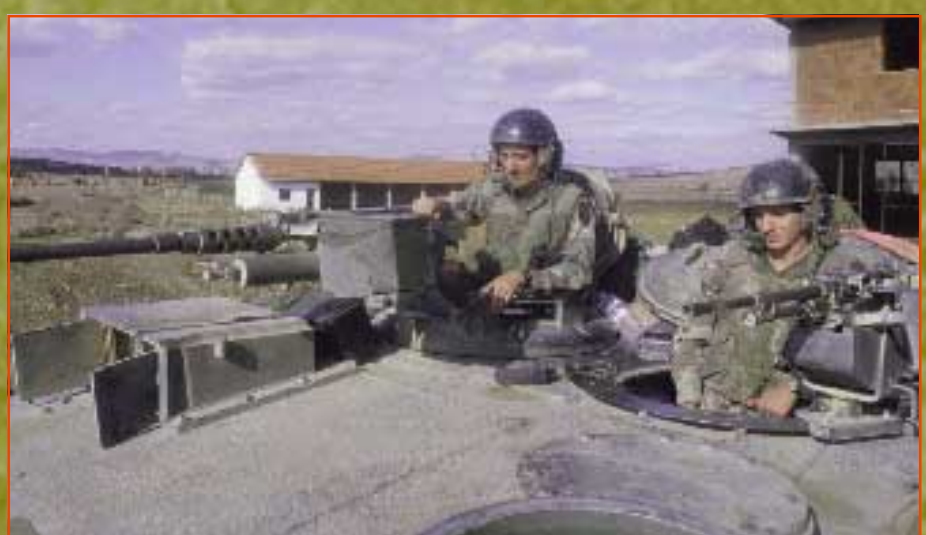
At year's end, road transportation continued to test the nerves of drivers and passengers alike, with the only major two-lane roads into Kosovo often clogged by trucks carrying supplies. Without traffic laws and enforcement, drivers did pretty much what they deemed necessary to reach their destinations.

The air smelled of burnt debris, diesel fumes and dust. With no organized trash pick-up services available, some people burned everything from dirty diapers to plastic bottles. Nonetheless, refuse littered the streets. Even medical waste, according to 415th CA Bn. officials, filled cardboard boxes simply heaped atop a dumpster outside a local hospital. And the sewage system in outlying villages was often nothing more than pouring waste on the ground to dissolve into the earth.

CA soldiers and military police continued to deal with arson, theft and incidents that arose when families moved into vacated homes.

Because legal documents — including property deeds and auto registrations — were destroyed during the war, ownership is difficult to prove and disprove, Boehme said. Military officials in Kosovo estimate 40 percent of the automobiles in the country were stolen from other European countries, including Germany and Greece.

"There's no civil rule here," Boehme said. "If you're the gang or have the most friends, you can pretty



Tank commander SGT Jeffrey Cortes *(left)* and SGT Paul Harris from the Germany-based 77th Armored Regt. man a position near Gnjilane.

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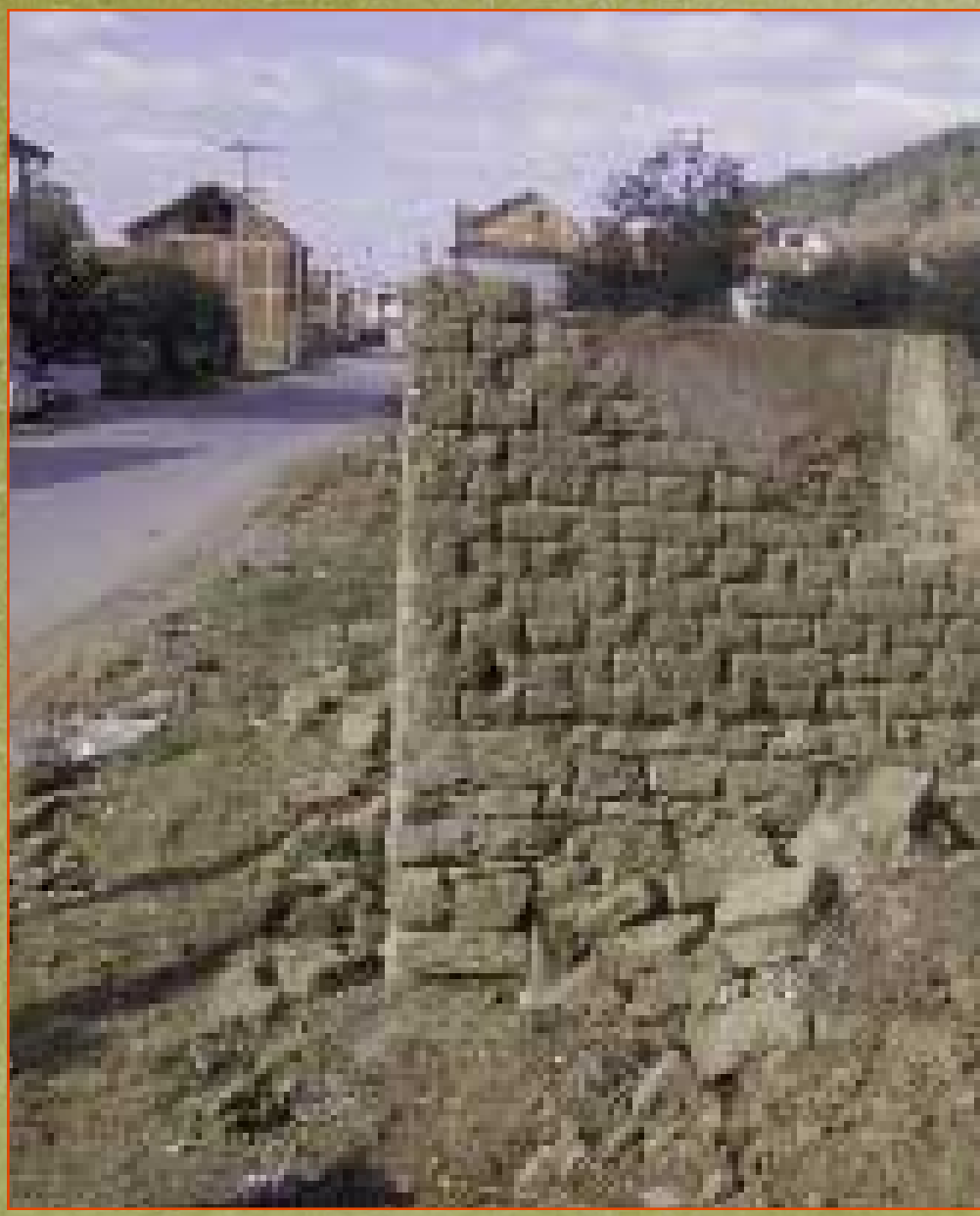


much make your own rules." It's the role of U.N. peacekeepers to see that troublemakers don't thrive.

"The people here have a '92' system, similar to our '911,'" Boehme said. "But it's unreliable, because transformers burn out and the phone system crashes due to electrical problems."

The reality is that centuries-old hatreds are always just below the surface in the Balkans, he said. Soldiers in Kosovo know any infraction can send it boiling over the top, anytime, anywhere.

In the midst of disorder and a fragile peace, Serbs and Kosovars alike are visibly enthusiastic when U.S. military vehicles bring soldiers to their areas to check on their security and provide escort to the areas where they can safely purchase food and supplies or receive medical and dental care.

In Urosevac, soldiers from the 3rd Bn., 504th Inf. Regt., from Fort Bragg, N.C., patrolled the area of red-roofed brick houses, many of which were doorless, windowless shells whose construction was abruptly halted by the outbreak of war. Other houses had been burned by arsonists. In between, garbage and heaps of broken brick and cinderblocks littered empty, weed-covered lots.

"The people rebuild, from the roof down, as funds become available," Kaminski said.

Urosevac, a town of 60,000, included 5,000 Serbs before the war. U.S. soldiers now guard virtually every Serb remaining in town — all 23 of them, according to CPT Dave Fivecoat, assistant operations officer of the 3rd Bn., 504th Inf.

Soldiers conduct mounted and dismounted patrols in the city and guard all of its Serbian Orthodox churches, Fivecoat said.

SPC Juan Garcia, from the battalion's Co. C, said: "This is different from any other deployment I've been on, because we're doing both types of patrols and have to load and lock weapons, carrying them with us all the time."

One patrol took him to a house where three suspects hoarded ammunition for shotguns and AK-47 assault rifles, he said.

Through an interpreter, CPL Jeff Lee from the battalion's Co. D, and others, talked to the area's Serbs. Some days, they escorted them to market at a Serb enclave about 25 kilometers away.

"Other times, we chase arsonists and thieves," Lee said. That can be most frustrating because "the culprits are usually gone by the time we can get there. When we first arrived, arsonists torched at least one vacant Serb home a night. House-burnings aren't so prevalent anymore."

Earlier in the day soldiers from the 299th Forward Support Bn., a 1st Inf. Div. unit from Germany, left Camp Monteith for a two-hour drive to a remote area in Pidic, where they set up

Many of Kosovo's towns and villages were reduced to rubble during the ethnic battles that preceded the arrival of NATO ground forces.

a medical aid station in an old school administration building.

2LT Therese Jones, mission OIC, determined where aid would be provided. "Since July, we've conducted three of these missions per week," she said, "revisiting each site every two weeks."

Notice of the medics' coming is spread by word of mouth. Initially, 15 patients — mostly women with children — arrived. After five hours at the site, well over 50 people had converged on the makeshift medical facility.

Arven Limoni, a Kosovar interpreter, explained the Army physician assistants' diagnoses to concerned mothers and tried to calm crying toddlers.

One little girl would not be quieted. "It's because she's terrified of uniforms," Limoni explained. The girl's mother had told him: "She doesn't understand about NATO soldiers and how they're here to help us. All she knows is she saw uniformed Serb soldiers burn homes."

In another room, dentist MAJ Michael Evans extracted some teeth. "Many of these kids have never seen a dentist," he said. "I extracted four teeth recently from a seven-year old. That's unheard of with our kids."

Outside, school children, dismissed from their classes, spent hours visiting with soldiers pulling security outside. Soon small U.S. flags appeared from the soldiers' Humvees and into little hands. M&Ms came out of MRE pouches, and even the bottled water the soldiers shared elicited broad smiles.

Before leaving the aid station, the patients received toothbrushes, sunglasses, and stuffed animals and clothing donated by U.S. military families and local nationals in Germany.

In three months, the medical team saw more than 2,000 patients, Jones said. "Occasionally, we make house calls to check up on people with terminal illnesses, even though there's nothing we can do to help them, medically.

"They can go to the hospital in Gnjilane, a Kosovar city — if they can get there," Jones continued. "But the Serbs fear they won't receive the proper medical care, even though we have a U.S. presence at the hospital and international aid organization physicians are among its staff.

Military and non-governmental organization officials say Serbs' fear of care from predominantly Kosovar medical personnel is unfounded.

"We've worked very closely with Kosovar physicians to get around biases and ensure that they treat the Serbs equitably," said physician's assistant Watson.

"To understand the problems, you have to go back to 1989," Watson said. "Milosevic set the stage for the country's medical woes. He initiated a parallel education system that favored Serb medical students. Kosovars had little access to books and supplies. So, locally, you see a lot of unusual medical practices.

"It's like going back 100 years," Watson said. "X-ray, oncology and radiation capabilities are poor. In July, no medical infrastructure existed. In the Serb town of Klokot, an orthopedic-rehabilitation center with 400 beds

An American soldier and a Kosovar man share a lighter moment along a road leading to the town of Pidic.

had been abandoned. Only one doctor returned. So I re-established the hospital there and we rehabilitated a lot of amputees."

Formerly, the center had drawn a proportionate mix of Kosovars and Serbs, Watson said. Then UCK — the Albanian acronym for Ushtria Clirimtare E. Kosoves, known in English as the Kosovo Liberation Army — came out and intimidated the Serbs. UCK was disbanded in September 1999.

"Military physicians and their staffs filled the void until physicians from non-governmental organizations arrived," Watson said.

Before winter, international aid organizations and civil affairs personnel continued to determine the people's needs for medical care, food, building materials and clothing.

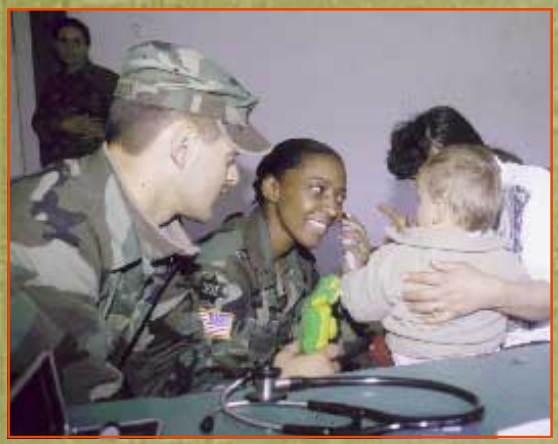
In Gnjilane, shops, produce markets and some restaurants had opened, indicating the beginning of a gradual return to normalcy.

Law and order were gradually returning, thanks to the military patrols. And by October, the U.N. police force in Kosovo included 450 American police officers, said Lexington, Ky., patrolman Mark Sayre.

A former soldier, Sayre signed a one-year contract with DynCorp, through the U.S. State Department, to help enforce law and order. So did police officers from Nigeria, Poland, Jordan, Russia, Argentina, France, Germany, Austria and Fiji. The target U.N. police force is 5,000, Sayre said.

"When the force is full up, it will include officers from 15 nations," he said. "We'll train the Kosovar Police Service, composed of Kosovar and Serb citizens."

With establishment of a regular police force, the citizens of Kosovo will be able to focus fully on rebuilding the country's infrastructure and putting their lives back together, Boehme said. □



Aided by an interpreter *(left)*, a 299th Fwd. Sprt. Bn. medic talks with a local woman while examining her child at a medical clinic in Pidic.

CPT Dave Fivecoat *(far left)* of the 504th Inf. visits with local Serbs in Urosevac. The woman in uniform is a Kosovar contract interpreter.

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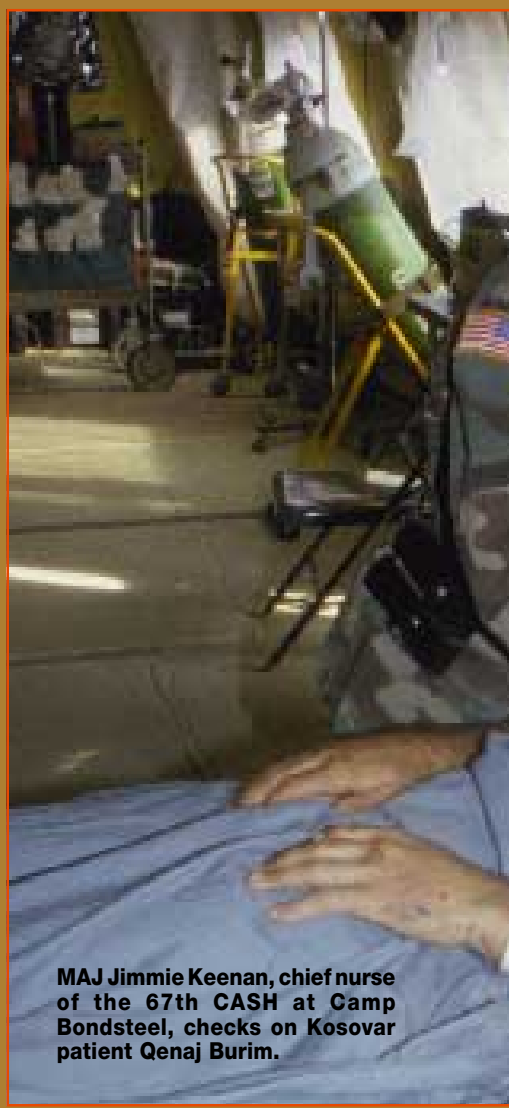


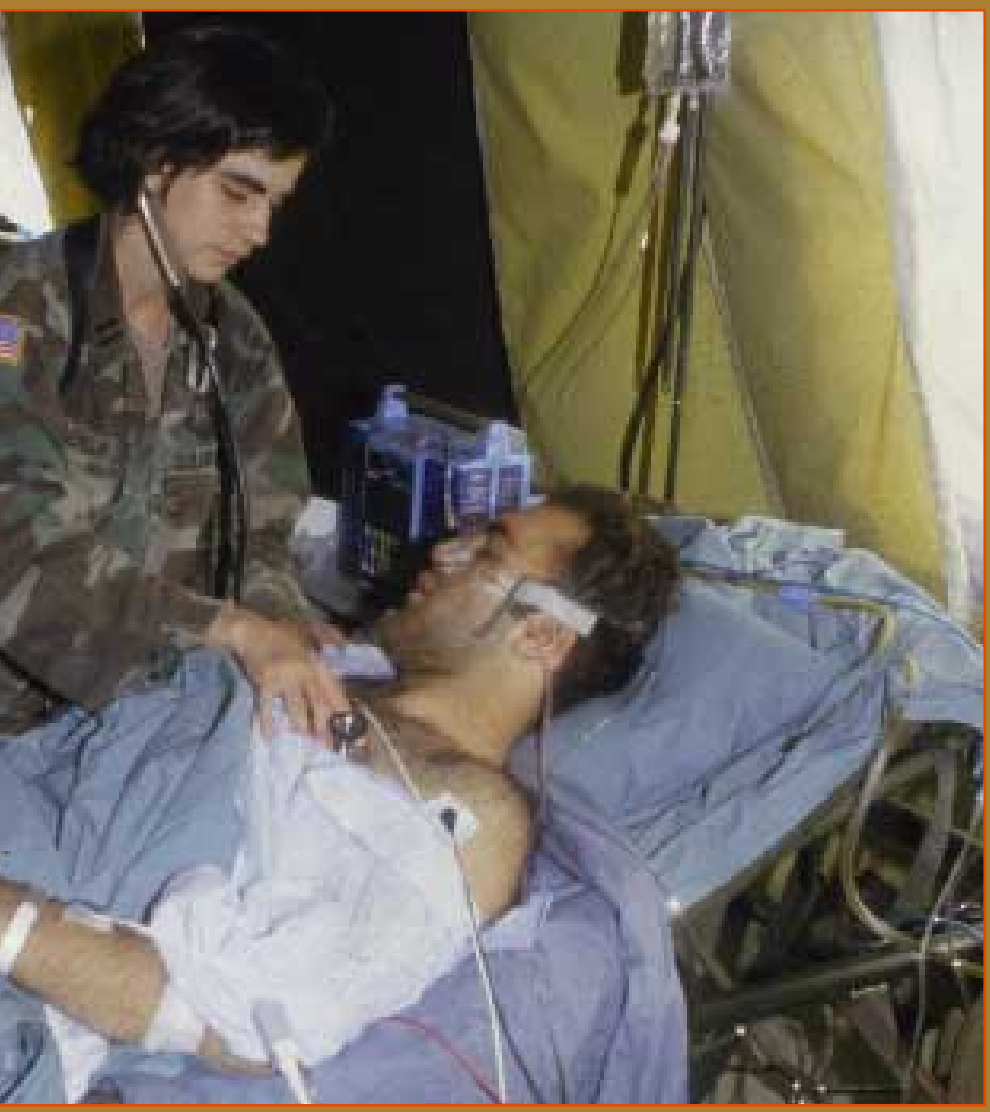
MAJ Jimmie Keenan, chief nurse of the 67th CASH at Camp Bondsteel, checks on Kosovar patient Qenaj Burim.

IN Kosovo, medical personnel at the 67th Combat Area Support Hospital from Würzburg, Germany, care for soldiers and civilians alike. The latter are most likely to be treated for land mine and auto injuries or bullet wounds.

"Under medical rules of engagement, we treat anyone who's in danger of losing life, limb or

A*S*H

Story and Photos by Heike Hasenauer



"... we treat anyone who's in danger of losing life, limb or eyesight."

eyesight," said chief nurse MAJ Jimmie Keenan.

Recent auto accident victim Qenaj Burim, from Gnjilane, "would have died if he hadn't been brought here," Keenan said. "Non-governmental medical aid agencies are located in local facilities, but they can't treat this level of trauma." Burim needed five hours of surgery for injuries that included a lacerated liver and fractured pelvis and femur.

"Our goal is to stabilize patients and transfer them to such local facilities as the Pristina University Hospital in Kosovo," she said. "The hospital in Skopje, Macedonia, is another option. Unfortunately, however, local hospitals often can provide only very basic care," Keenan said. "They have the qualified doctors and nurses, but no equipment or supplies."

As a result, the 67th CASH boasts "the most experienced war trauma team in the Army. They've handled casualties resulting from every kind of weapon used in a high-intensity conflict," said Task Force Falcon medical commander COL Russell W. Taylor.

Medical personnel from the task force — which includes such other elements of V Corps' 30th Medical Brigade as the 557th Ground Ambulance Plt. from Wiesbaden, Germany — haven't seen such a variety of combat casualties since Vietnam, he said. "We've treated people from 2 to 78 years old, among them 15 land-mine victims, and toddlers shot by snipers."

"I don't think we were prepared for what we saw here," said Keenan. "We thought it would be like Bosnia. But Bosnia had a medical infrastructure; Kosovo doesn't. I have a 2-year-old. And it's hard for me to see wounded children. I treated a 6-year-old who'd been shot through the liver while he played hide-and-seek," she added.

"To help each other cope with what we've seen, we conduct stress debriefings through a chaplain and combat stress team," Taylor said. "When you eat, sleep and live together, you learn to tell when someone's down, and you work to bring them back up."

In October, Taylor said the 67th CASH had handled more than 100 trauma cases and provided some kind of medical service to more than 3,000 people. □